

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

DUŠAN ŠAROTAR
BILLIARDS AT THE HOTEL
DOBRAJ

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Dušan Šarotar: Billiards At The Hotel Dobray

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Only rarely did the girl stay at home alone on a Sunday. She used the excuse of the rain and not feeling well because she didn't feel like going to Mass. Her mother tried to convince her that it was not appropriate to leave her alone, but surprisingly, her father stood up for his daughter, for once managing to overcome the doubts and fears he carried within. He couldn't explain this to himself, let alone to his wife who relentlessly drilled him about it with questions she had not run out of even when they reached the churchyard. It was still gnawing away in his mind when the local choir started singing. That Sunday they were particularly out of tune, something the organist must also have realised since he just stopped playing, raised his hands and joined in the singing with the congregation. The sound from the organ pipes echoed above the nave for a moment, like an invisible eye watching over everything. Then only the sound of discordant singing, of great sadness, pain and lamentation, lingered in the vaults, around the choir and above the heads turned towards the painted King wearing the Crown of Thorns.

Géza the tailor took hold of his wife's hand and squeezed it. She was singing so quietly it sounded as if she was just breathing loudly. They had the feeling that this was a question they might never be able to ask, but, at this moment at least, regardless of what it was, they no longer doubted that somewhere lay the answer, even if it remained a secret for eternity. Maybe The One they were both looking at was not crowned in vain.

The girl lay in her bed looking out of the low cross-barred window. She had promised to stay in bed and was still there despite her restlessness. She could feel and hear her heartbeat. She felt a need to go outside, to go for a walk and think about things. Nevertheless she could not find the strength to get up and anyway, where could she go with the town full of the enemy army. She wished she could hide by burying herself under the blanket until the long, difficult days were over. Maybe she should have gone to Mass with her mother and father, to soothe her fever with singing and words amongst the crowd gathered within the cold walls of the church. Of course that was not at all what she really wanted. She was thinking about a totally different kind of music now. Again she counted on her fingers the days till the concert at the coffeehouse.

"Monday," she began counting silently and stared at the sky hanging over the town, pressing down upon it with an invisible thumb; "Tuesday," it looked like the clouds were also tired and slowly began to fall towards the silent land, still cold and bare; "Wednesday," abandoned even by the birds as if they were taking flight from the eye. She could see it, floating above the window, high above the wooden cross-shaped mullion, opening slowly.

Edina would often stare at the clouds. She had fun herding sheep, counting bears and blinking at the sun, and would admire the mountains that appeared above the flat landscape out of the dark, early evening haze, coloured deep red by the rays of the setting sun, especially since she had never seen any real mountains. But this time it was different. Of course she was no longer afraid of the black storm clouds and understood all about thunder and lightning, but looking at that eye becoming ever more defined she had

the uneasy feeling she had seen it before. As if it was pulling her in towards itself, ever deeper and ever stronger. The clear patch of sky with which the eye was looking down on the world seemed ever more beautiful, perfect and exciting. It was like Isaac's music the other day in the garden. Yes, music was all she could compare with the feeling that was overwhelming her. As she seemed to be getting closer to the vision, feeling as if she herself had floated through the cross in the window, it seemed the music was drowning into silence, words merging into a monotonous sound, full of great sadness, not death however, neither rapture nor weeping. Perhaps it was love, but she couldn't bring herself to say this.

After Mass, when people were already standing up and the place filled with whispers mixed with the screeching of wooden benches, stamping of feet and the smell of burnt-out candles, the tailor was still holding his wife's hand. They remained seated and stared into the emptiness, as if the words from the Bible were still echoing inside them:

"They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment."

The men had already put their hats back on, the children had to be held back to stop them running out into the churchyard where they would normally tear around and play hide-and-seek before their overly concerned parents would find them and caution them. "It is inappropriate," they would say, "to play so loudly around here". The women, heads bowed, humble and seemingly rapt, as if still listening to the faded song, poked around their little handbags for hankies and small change for a candle, a prayer, a petition and especially for the donation towards a new embroidered altar cloth. Surprisingly, none of them even thought about the World War, the dead, the wounded and the missing, as if it was all still happening somewhere far away, in some other world, or perhaps no one dared to think about what awaited them all, about what they would not, especially here, be able to hide from. Or perhaps the words from the reading were still echoing in their minds: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

A row of people, tall and short, proud and humble, was pushing towards the door that remained shut. To start with no one complained, no one raised their voice or even their gaze from the floor. As if they carried patience, tolerance and humility inside themselves. But they kept moving on towards the door.

Slowly they shuffled their feet, shifting their weight around with their backs turned to the gold-framed image from which The One they had once crowned and then abandoned watched over them.

"Open up, open the door, let us out," someone said after a while. The voice would have been lost in the crowd, in the mass of bodies pushing towards the exit, had not someone else at the back of the row shouted out the same.

The tailor and his wife were still sitting in the pew. They were the last ones to get up.

The excited voices and complaints, spreading fast among the crowd and flooding over the hall made the pair look at each other. They didn't understand the commotion, their minds still serene.

"I am the gate," said the voice of a child who had bolted the door as a prank. The church was filled with genuine laughter as if no one understood.

"So from that day on they plotted to take his life," was written and was whispered even after these silent, good people who could still talk about the soul, poured through the door and streamed down the steps. "But," someone might have thought, "were they ever really forgiven?"

Finally, stepping out into the bright light, being the last ones out leaving only emptiness behind them, still holding hands, the couple stood still just as on the day they had first stood together on the top step, him in the same suit with a hat, her wearing a veil.

It had been a misty April day, just like this one, thirteen years ago in 1931. Like now, they were more or less alone, but then they were laughing. They were young and expecting a baby which was already kicking in its mother's womb. He lifted his wife, carried her down the steps and they bravely set off into the mist. Now they have almost forgotten all that had happened after that.

Though a mist just like it, impenetrable and creeping, engulfing anything it approached also waited for them at the door on this day, they felt that things were different now. It was as if the outlines and shadows moving away and disappearing into the distance, and especially their incomprehensible voices, all had something sinister and secretive about them, like a premonition. From where they were standing, or indeed from anywhere, they couldn't see anything, let alone understand.

All they could hear from the road leading straight to the park and on through the tree-lined drive to the castle was the stamp of marching feet flattening the ground beneath them. Everything else in the whiteness of this milky apparition was hidden, even to the eye still floating above the town.

Stepping towards the road they came across a group of people standing and talking at the exit from the churchyard. After Mass it was normal to go for a drink of wine or some good fresh coffee at any of the coffeehouses near the Lutheran church or, more frequently, at the Hotel Dobray. This time they tried to excuse themselves that they were in a hurry to get home. They wanted to have a quick pint at the Sočič place and then really go home where Edina was waiting for them and, despite it being Sunday, Géza wanted to press the suit he had made for Schwartz's son again before lunch. He intended to take it round to the customer's home in the afternoon for him to try it on.

But the others, desperate for a drink, insisted. They wouldn't normally join the Barbarič couple or the Karases, but now they were the only ones they met outside. The mist that Sunday had really taken its toll.

"The priest spoke well today, but did you see his wife and the fur coat she was wearing," Mrs Barbarič started off with her usual comments that no one was safe from, especially since her husband had been promoted in his job at the town hall.

"Of course I saw it, how could I not have! The poor woman was so cold she just had to keep stroking her coat, even during confession," Mrs Karas added. "Well, your hubby will be able to take you down to Berger's shop where you can choose something very furry and heavy. The Jew is sure to have something to suit you in his shop."

"Barbarič, did you hear what Mariška said?! You see, this is what it is like with us, I'm unworthy, no one at our house ever listens to me. It's as if I wasn't there."

"Come on, yours is at the Registry now! He's sure to take you somewhere nice now."

"Knowing my luck, by the time he gets round to it they will have closed down all the Jews' shops," she added and laughed.

"At least there'll be some order round here, like elsewhere in the world," Barbarič, the new registrar at the Town Hall Land Registry, raised his voice. "The Germans know what they are doing. Not that I have anything against the Hungarians, but they could never deal with these Jewish money mongers. At the

town hall everyone is saying how things need to be put in order. You can't have everyone in Sóbota opening shops here, there and everywhere, charging whatever they like. We've all had enough. We'll show them, you'll see!"

"The other day our boss, Mr Benko, was saying that the Jews should be left alone. Though we get quite a lot of business from German butchers, the boss says the Germans haven't got the right policies. We should be talking to them. The Jews are strong. We need their connections and markets. Who else can we sell to wholesale if not the Jews," said Karas, a sales representative for Benko's Butchers.

"It's all politics, big politics. Now we have an opportunity to show who we are! At the Town Hall we will do what we see fit!"

Géza the tailor and his wife were holding each other under the arm and stayed silent. It was as if they didn't have anything to add to this strange conversation, one that probably only the mist was truly touched by. With every step they made they felt that they really should find an excuse this time and escape this company before they reach the coffeehouse, where they expected to have to sit around sipping wine with this lot all day.

"Are you going to the concert on Wednesday?" the tailor's wife asked just to change the subject.

"What concert?" everyone asked surprised in unison.

"At the Dobray, Schwartz's son is giving his first concert! Géza has even made him a new suit for the occasion. It's sure to be brilliant. We have been invited, Edina is looking forward to it and it has been ages since we've gone somewhere to listen to music, in fact I can't even remember the last time we went anywhere!"

There was a moment of silence among them. Perhaps they were trying to think of something to say, perhaps they didn't quite hear what she said, or maybe it was embarrassment, misunderstanding, a confusing unease. In any case, the silence was more revealing than any words. They all stared into the distance, down the empty road towards the town, hidden by the mist.

The coffeehouse at the Hotel Dobray was full of people treating themselves to a glass of good wine after Mass. The men would order a strong wine from Lendava and mix it with mineral water. Their wives and the ladies' tables sipped on a sweet Traminer from Radgona. Those who came here early in the morning for a coffee and a shot of something stronger, skipping their religious duties without a single drop of guilty conscience, reading the newspapers or flicking through illustrated German magazines, were by now already waiting for the goulash the waiters would soon be offering. On seeing that there wasn't a single chair available amongst the crowd, let alone a table to sit by under the tall windows where they liked sitting on such occasions, Géza the tailor and his wife looked at each other thinking this might be the opportunity to get away from the annoying company and go off on their own somewhere. They no longer fancied that beer now, let alone excessive empty talking, and they didn't really feel at home in lounge-bar politics, another reason why they didn't often come here. The Hotel Dobray was best known as a distinguished place for the Sóbota elite, but on Sundays it was frequented by a mixture of students, professors, tradesmen, newspaper men, civil servants together with workers from fast-growing local factories, Benko's butchers, tailors like the Cvetičes and the Šiftars, carpenters from Hartner's saw-mill and others, their

voices, their complaints, their joys and their silences all contributing to the coffeehouse atmosphere, incomprehensible to many.

Maybe these people, the souls of these rapturous people, starting endless debates over and over again, playing cards and beating each other on black and white chequered boards were most like fishermen, travellers on abandoned stations, even poets perhaps. All with a feeling that they are waiting for something big, an inspiration that never returns.

Occasionally someone, well after nightfall and when the gypsies came to play music round the tables and heads were emptied and quiet again as if they were slowly being filled with gentle whispers, let something slip. On such occasions the thought that the secret was still around somewhere maybe just crossed the minds of those who had been sitting there for a long time.

The company stood in the doorway, constantly moving out of the way of the skilful waiters, serving customers from large trays they carried high above their heads from the bar across the hall into the lounge area.

Géza Šiftar was already saying goodbye to Mariška Karas and Trezika Barbarič when Laci, the hotelier and coffeehouse manager at the Dobray, intercepted them, saying with astonishment:

"I don't know what's going on!?! Today we are busier than ever! Please, sirs, ladies, do step in and we'll find a corner for you. Please excuse us, it's a Sunday and it's a madhouse in here!"

They were seated in the corner next to the back window at a table reserved for the musicians. Barbarič ordered wine and mineral water for all of them without asking the other men or even looking at the ladies.

"There, everything is possible, so long as you see the right person," he bragged again and placed his large wallet in the middle of the table as if to say the bill was on him today. "You just need to know how to deal with people, particularly waiters. I keep telling my Trezika this, don't I, just tell them!" he said turning towards his wife.

"I was just about to say how different things are today, especially since this clever husband of mine has been promoted. Well, I'm not just talking about the pay rise, it's also the attitude. Just see how they all respect him. Yes, I prayed long and hard for him. As soon as I met him I knew he would become great one day!"

Mrs Šiftar, sitting next to the window, turned her gaze outside. The mist still hung about the road, but seemed to be slowly thinning away, reddening around the morning sun above. Not used to drinking wine her cheeks warmed up and the paleness of her face shyly vanished with the onset of a gentle smile. Géza noticed the sparkle in her eyes.

On the other side of the road, right opposite the Dobray, Mr Ascher and his son were cleaning the window of their family shop. The son was wiping away the dust and shifting their wares around and the father, smoking a pipe, stood outside on the road, pacing up and down as if he was waiting for someone.

"Oh, my husband is stuck at that Benko place. No chance of promotion there. They still send him out and about. He rides his bike around this unfortunate land of ours all day long. All his business is with farmers and Jews. I keep telling him he needs to stand up for himself more. Mind you, he is quite well paid. Elsewhere he would struggle to get by with the pay offered. Still, just look at how thin he has become. Just skin and bones and he works for a butcher!" she concluded and looked over the faces in the coffeehouse floating in a cloud of bluish tobacco smoke. Then she bent over the table with the typical frothy look of

envy in her eyes and hissed: "Just look at Benko over there. Looks like he's about to burst open. Fat as one of those pigs of his!"

"Laci, bring another one, the ladies are thirsty," Karas ordered, obviously feeling that burning sensation again, a fire inside him that his Mariška will never be able to extinguish.

Géza was still silent. He was no longer counting the glasses of wine but looked at his pocket watch after each one. Every so often he smiled politely as if he was following the conversation, or winked at his wife. They were now both aware that they would not get away any time soon.

"The next round is on us," he said and instantly returned to his thoughts as Laci placed fresh bottles of wine and mineral water onto the table. Though he knew it wasn't very polite, he was trying to listen to the conversation at the table behind him.

"I knew this Hungarian government would scatter as soon as smoke appeared above Budapest. Now the first English bomb has fallen from the sky and the landlocked Admiral Nikolaus von Horthy is already retreating his invisible fleet. I wonder where they will hide, perhaps at the bottom of Lake Balaton?"

"I'm more interested in what will happen to us. Slovenes are in no better a situation, trapped in this unfortunate land of ours. We can't rely on our elite any more. Hartner is already changing his tune. His Magyar Élet Part where he made us all out to be Hungarians no longer toes the same line. Now they're falling apart he would pass us on to the Germans for free. I am telling you something, our final hour is fast approaching. We will all be forced to perform on a larger stage!"

"I am afraid. I fear that it is far too late for us. Maybe today is the last time we shall sit here like this at our good old Dobray. The Germans are very different. They have hardly arrived and they are already showing their teeth. They are bound to find a way to subdue the lot of us. If they don't manage it, no one ever will."

"What about the Russians?" said a third voice at the table, but before Géza could catch his train of thought he was disturbed by the voice of his wife, still looking out of the window.

"Look, look at what they are doing to them," she exclaimed. Géza turned to see her pale face for a moment. He could see her shaking in shock and fear. They were both standing up now. He in order to try to calm her down and she because she could no longer just sit there. Surprisingly no one else even moved. It was as if they didn't hear or see anything.

Across the road from the Hotel Dobray an army motorcycle with a sidecar stopped in front of Ascher's shop where the merchant and his son were still standing. A German Officer in a long black coat and a swastika on his sleeve stepped out of the low sidecar. He swiftly walked up to the two men who stood there paralyzed in front of the shop and pushed them against the wall with a short stick he held in his hand. Then the driver also got off the motorcycle and, holding a small bucket he took from the bike's handle bars, approached the officer.

"The SS," someone in the coffeehouse said out loud when they recognised the soldiers in the street.

Géza held his wife's hand. They saw the officer use his stick to draw an invisible star onto old Mr Ascher's chest as he was leaning against the wall of his shop. The driver in the meanwhile poured black paint over the just polished shop window and then using a thick paintbrush messily drew out a large Star of David.

"Disgusting, this is disgusting!" a lone voice was heard in the coffeeshop left silent by the going-on across the road. "Damn you gentlemen, are your own arses all you can think about," young Gašparič started

shouting. He was a student, and this outburst was encouraged both by the wine and particularly by the *Mladi Prekmurec* journal, a publication in which young and upcoming intelligentsia studying in Maribor and Ljubljana regularly and bravely expressed their opinions, which the students at the Dobray liked to read. "Can't you see, you miserable lot, that this is what's in line for us Slovenes too! The world is falling apart and all you can do is sit around waiting." He kept shouting despite knowing that the Gestapo had already marked him out and that they had their informants in the coffeehouse.

They halted on the doorstep of the hotel. The earlier mist in which the town was hiding had been dispersed by the midday sun. The roads around the main square were empty. All was calm in front of Ascher's shop now too. The black star had dried onto the glass and it would be impossible to wipe it off. It would remain there for some time yet, and perhaps it would never again be possible to truly delete this dark stain.

Géza the tailor wrapped his wife's coat around her fragile figure as they both glanced from the corners of their eyes at the poster displayed on the door, inviting people to the violin concert on Wednesday. He felt his wife shudder, as if she was standing naked in the mist.

Before they stepped out into the road, Géza dropped some loose change into the palm of a gypsy woman who appeared out of nowhere. They both knew that Sunday was not the right day for fortune telling.

At that moment music came streaming out of the hotel. It was one of those sad tunes that only tired musicians are capable of playing. Musicians with gnarled fingers, bending dusty roads, recalling places where no roads exist, the only way to reach the other side. They were well aware that this was music to bring a lump to any throat and soften any heart. Just for a moment they seemed to be on the trail of a lost soul and the thought that should never have been allowed to get lost followed closely, that somewhere the secret still remains.

4.

The girl stayed up late spooling black thread and listened to her mother reading out loud. Stories of good people and mysterious places wove into the wonderful garment being created by the hard-working hands of her father. She carried on winding even when she ran out of black thread and was already dreaming.

The purring of the sewing machine was replaced with the splashing of the large wheel rolling along the water. It seemed as if she was part of the eye, floating high above. She could see a boy riding a bike along the river. The black tracks he was drawing on the surface of the quiet and slow Pannonian river were like a sharp resounding string. She knew he could not see her, but could feel she was with him. He was leaving, sinking into the evening and disappearing round the riverbend. Soon all that remained above the dark river was the resonance of the sound that never really fades.

On Wednesday the twenty sixth of April 1944, just before five o'clock, a small group of people gathered on the steps of the Hotel Dobray. Few remember just how dreary and cold the day was. The greyness covering the sky blurred all shadows. As if the town had wrapped itself up in silence and gone into a long deep sleep for the afternoon.

“That’s a Siberian wind blowing,” the men whispered as they paced around their wives who were trying despite the cold to keep their dignity. They waited patiently to be invited inside. Silent as if the distance inside them was already growing and they were the only ones that could hear the voice carried on the wind. It must have been luring them somewhere far away to where this cold spirit that pushed itself under their coats came from. Though they couldn’t show it, they could feel their souls freezing over.

Maybe it was just a feeling, the unease of seeing this handful of frightened people clinging onto hope despite the events of the last few days. They all tried to think about the concert and the music of the young Isaac Schwartz who would soon be giving his recital for the first time.

“They will take everything from us and destroy us,” Mr Hoyer said. “They have already closed down our shops. How are we supposed to make a living?”

“Forget it, so long as they leave our children alone. I have heard they have started rounding up people and sending them away. I don’t believe the Hungarians would allow them to imprison us. What have we ever done to them? We were always fair and correct in the way we dealt with them.”

Mr Blau, whose shop the Germans had sealed off a day earlier, confiscating all his wares, was still hoping he would be successful with a petition to Budapest where he had good connections with lawyers and Horthy’s officials. He would regularly visit them on his business trips to the capital and supply them with the best wines and ‘little treats for their ladies’, as he would say.

“This will not end well. Don’t you listen to what they are saying on the radio? This is the end of Hungarian daydreaming. The West is no longer going to appease them now that they have clubbed together with the Reich. They no longer need us and will sell us out to Hitler cheaply just so their lot can go on dancing.”

“I know, I know all that, but the Hungarians are afraid of the Russians who will take everything anyway.”

“We will have to join forces. Our elders will have to do something. People in Budapest have left the Jewish Councils to deal with all their papers. We must prepare to leave if it won’t be possible to live here any longer.”

“Where can an impoverished Jew go?” young Hirschl said a little too loudly, wakening the group as if a forgotten alarm clock had been set off. “Why should we wander about like the lost man rabbi Dr Roth keeps telling us about?”

“Now is not the time for storytelling. We have already packed our bags and are leaving on the first train out, anywhere,” Mr Ascher said decisively. He had had everything prepared on Sunday, as soon as the SS ruined his shop window.

“But where, where I ask you! Can’t you see all the trains are full? There is no place or peace for a Jew in this wretched land and the Jerusalem they kept promising us is further away than ever. Don’t you read what is written? Many are willing, few are chosen!”

“Well, Madame Judith, do you know what young master Schwartz will be playing? It doesn’t say it anywhere,” the ladies talked amongst themselves as if they did not want to see or realise that this was no longer about music.

“I heard that the young man plays Brahms’ Hungarian Dances exquisitely. He will be supported by a whole band, a gypsy one of course. That’ll be something for us!”

Šiftar the tailor's family arrived at a few minutes to five. A handful of people dressed in their Sunday best were huddling in the doorway of the Hotel Dobray. The door was still locked. The curtains in the tall windows looking onto the chestnut trees in the garden were half drawn. There was only a faint light behind the heavy red hangings but the colourful chandeliers that normally stayed on all day to brighten up the coffeehouse remained switched off.

The people pacing at the entrance had been chilled to the bone by the wind. The men standing on the top steps kept taking off their hats and pressing their noses against the glass doors to see down the empty corridor. There wasn't a soul to be seen in the area where the hotelier Laci would normally be welcoming his guests.

"It's dark even in the grand salon where they are supposed to be playing," people soon began saying.

"It can't be true!"

"What do Hitler's lot think they are up to? What now?"

"Has anyone seen Mr Schwartz? It's him we should talk to!"

"Someone should tell us what's going on. They can't just close the Dobray like this."

Edina stood between her parents. They waited under the last chestnut tree in front of the hotel, feeling that they somehow didn't fit in. Though they never thought themselves apart, Edina felt uncomfortable and strange, a nuisance even, in being there. She could not understand why of course. She had that burning feeling inside her again, thousands of thoughts burning. She felt ashamed. Her cheeks blushed as she was not used to such company, to the coffeehouse atmosphere, the chosen words and innuendos. At the same time her heart quickened with an anticipation she could hardly hide, of seeing young Isaac and hearing his heavenly music. But there was also the anger, her first unhealed wound that she could not forget, let alone forgive. Who could possibly understand all this or stand for it, she thought. She smirked when she remembered how he had never appeared when she went to his house on Sunday evening with her father to deliver the suit. She knew it wasn't really appropriate for her to accompany her father when he was visiting people for business, but she went only because she appreciated that Father did after all understand her, and then he went and hid from view for the entire visit. Mr Schwartz politely apologised for his son by explaining that he was practising. It was as if someone had dunked her into freezing water, or killed her and dumped her in front of the door, she thought, though she didn't have a clue what that might really look like. It felt like that. She could hear him playing upstairs and knew he was in the middle of the living room, right above her. It was one of the most beautiful things she had ever experienced, and despite him playing the same tune as last time in the garden shed, it seemed quite different now. Today the tune was weighted, painful, deep and slow as if it had no beginning and no end. She felt like she was being ripped open. It hurt with a pain that would not draw tears, with a beauty unrecognisable to the eye. An angel never dies, she thought. This music is from another world. She just wanted to see him once more, she lied to herself a little. Standing here between her mother and father all that was on her mind was how she would see him and for the first time there was no one she could tell how she felt. With these feelings, she waited.

At five o'clock exactly the bells in both the Sóbota spires started ringing and the motorcycle with the sidecar appeared on the road in front of the Hotel Dobray. The noise and the clanging pierced the ears of

the concert audience. They were used to such scenes now so it only attracted their attention for a while. They were sure it was just another case of vanity and an attempt to show their power by an army not yet settled in this small corner of the world, in a town that was still getting used to the new uniforms.

But the motorcycle didn't stop, nor did it continue on down the dusty road. The uniformed soldier sitting right down in the sidecar suddenly stood up and pointed towards the hotel to the driver who suddenly turned the handle-bars and drove straight into the crowd of people instinctively pushing towards the door.

The Šiftars stood under the chestnut tree in shock. A vast emptiness now gaped between them and the people standing in the doorway, suddenly they were further away than they ever thought they could be. That was when Edina noticed that they were a marked people. Only now did she comprehend why they were made to wear the yellow stars sewn onto their garments.

People who were neighbours, shop keepers, acquaintances, friends or even just strangers only a few days ago were now just Jews. All of them, without distinction, without a name, face or language. And in this crowd of now identical people she could think of only one. The name Isaac was stuck in her throat.

"Let's go," she said grabbing hold of her mother and father, "let's go over there," she pulled them forward. But she could feel they were rooted to the spot as if they were tied to the tree. "Wait," her father said quietly. She let go and before her father could catch up with her she was right in the middle of the crowd.

The figure in the elegant black uniform looking as if he had dressed for the concert carefully stepped out of the sidecar right next to the entrance to the Hotel Dobray. The waiting group of Jews huddled up together and made way for the officer who in his polished boots slowly, somewhat arrogantly and indifferently walked towards the entrance. It was as if the scene had long been rehearsed, as if this was just a repetition. Perhaps it was just theatre, something surreal, but at the time no one knew who was in the audience and who was on the stage.

Without turning around or stopping in front of the door the apparition in black uniform pushed it open. It was as if a mysterious power was hidden in the gesture. A sigh escaped the crowd as if they were relieved. At the same time one could feel an inexplicable respect and loyalty in these voices, as if something had just revealed itself to them. Spellbound they stood there. The door they had so long been helplessly waiting to enter was now wide open. All they had to do was step inside. In the meantime the black figure had disappeared. The man in the uniform walked up the stairs to the first floor.

The girl, caught squashed amongst the bodies couldn't breathe. Drowning in this murky mass she could feel sharp elbows, shoulders and knees trying to hold people upright in waves of sighs, coughing and murmuring, she caught her name as for a moment she managed to swim to the surface, before she was engulfed again in the human whirlpool that pulled her back down to the bottom. Father and Mother are looking for me, flashed through her mind as she tried to get up onto her knees. She looked up towards the light that shimmered in the gaps between the rims of black hats, frightened and surprised faces and clenched hands. Beyond it the dark façade of the Hotel Dobray towered like mighty underwater walls, cavernous openings, cathedrals or concert halls. Just before she fainted, somewhere above all this the mighty eye she had been observing from her bedroom appeared. Once the pressure was released the bodies moved away from her as if all the water had finally drained away, she lay there under the steps in

darkness, thinking that the mighty eye through which she looked upon herself would probably never ever leave her.

5.

Only a year later did Edina find out what happened on that fateful night on the twenty sixth of April 1944 when Isaac's first concert at the coffeehouse was cancelled.

The Jews who gathered in front of the Hotel Dobray never entered the coffeehouse.

A few minutes after five o'clock the Nazis loaded Isaac's family together with the entire audience waiting for the concert onto a lorry and drove them to the railway station where they crammed them into a train. The coffeehouse gypsy band was there too, playing like they had never played before.

That same night they were moved to Čakovec, from where they went on to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland the following morning.

Children were separated from their mothers, wives from their husbands. Those able to work toiled away, dying in inhumane conditions.

The rest were stripped naked, their belongings confiscated, their hair shaved off and forced into huge washrooms. Deadly gas rather than water flowed through the pipes in the chambers. The bodies were then burnt in crematoria, which ran day and night like large factories.

In one single night all 400 Jews from Prekmurje were deported to Auschwitz and other concentration camps. After the war only 26 returned. Amongst them was Franz Schwartz.

The Sóbota Jewish community, one of the largest Jewish communities in what was the Kingdom of Yugoslavia before the Second World War, never recovered.

Decimated, impoverished and heavily stigmatised, the returning Jews were not able to form a minyan, a quorum of ten male Jewish adults required for the ritual reading from a sefer Torah at the synagogue, so the synagogue remained closed after the war.

After the synagogue was repeatedly broken into, looted and destroyed, the army began using it as a stable for its horses.

In 1954 the Sóbota authorities ordered the demolition of the synagogue. Soon after, according to plans by the architect Feri Novak, the first modern housing block in Murska Sobota was built on the site. To this day it is known locally as the 'Jewish block'.